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22

The Alchemy of Work with Young Women

Susan Morgan and Eliz McArdle

INTRODUCTION

'Equality has already been achieved' is the general belief of many young women in Northern Ireland (McAlister, Gray and Neill, 2007). The sentiment expressed in this statement, coupled with their disconnection to an equality struggle that may initially appear irrelevant, presents a complex and challenging picture for feminist youth work practice. Feminist demands for equality have been partially achieved but there remain enduring gender inequalities both locally and globally. The political, social and economic trends for young women reveal notable gains towards equality in a relatively short period of time, but stubborn historic inequalities persist; including the gender pay gap, political representation and violence against women, to name but a few. Holding these perspectives in mind is the starting point for contemporary feminist youth workers. Work with young women in Northern Ireland has a long history, but its distinctiveness has not featured in broader histories of feminist youth work practice (Morgan and McArdle, 2009). Guidance for young women's workers continues to be sporadic with limited structural support. Historically, the practice has been drawn either from feminist and/or informal education theory, and a few lone voices have carried the torch in developing a considered body of theory and practice in a UK context (see: Spence, 1996, 2004, 2010; Batsleer, 2008, 2013; Hanbury, Lee and Batsleer, 2010). This chapter attempts to build on this work and add to the articulation of the principles, methodology and transformative potential of work with young women. We consider the nuances and influence of a specifically feminist youth work approach within Northern Ireland and beyond – concluding with the *Alchemy of Work with Young Women* as a model of practice with both local and international reach and relevance.

The *Alchemy approach* has been built primarily from the thematic analysis of the work practices and insights of ten young women's

workers based across a range of youth work contexts in Northern Ireland. Taking inspiration from the ancient transformative process of alchemy, it emphasises an assets-based approach to developing an empowering practice (Kretzmann and McKnight, 1993), transmuting base metals into gold. The base metals are the young women at the centre of the practice; the feminist youth worker is the alchemist who blends systematic deliberate approaches with their intuitive ability. The gold is the transformation from growing self-awareness, through critical questioning of existing structures, towards actions that improve the lives of young women personally, socially and politically. The Alchemy of Work with Young Women is presented as an equation that can be applied across a range of settings; from the youth centre to a detached setting on the street; a conversation through to a structured project. Whilst the Alchemy of Work with Young Women has emerged from Northern Ireland its emphasis on transformation may hold resonance for an international audience.

NORTHERN IRELAND – A PLACE APART: LIVING WITH THE LEGACY OF CONFLICT

Northern Ireland is a small constituency geographically located north, on the island of Ireland. With a population of 1.85 million, this relatively insignificant land has gained some global profile through a local conflict, colloquially known as 'the troubles'. This most recent conflict (1968–1998) springs from the contested legacy of the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921 between Great Britain and Ireland. This treaty established the 'new' Irish Free State and made provisions for a new entity called 'Northern Ireland' – a constituent of six counties which continued to be constitutionally aligned to Great Britain. The population of these six counties is mixed, with one section of the community who wish for a new all-Ireland state and another who wish to maintain the constitutional status quo, with continued membership of the United Kingdom. Community segregation and separation are seen as a societal norm; sectarianism and violence are commonplace; and identities are defended and contested in symbols, flags, emblems and language. In global terms, this conflict paled into insignificance (with over 3,600 people being killed over a 30-year period), yet the connection to the UK, which in world affairs is seen as 'punching above its weight',[1] has provided this local conflict with a global stage. Following the signing of The Good Friday Agreement in 1998,[2] a peace process was begun.

Women and Young Women in Northern Ireland

Women have a quiet voice in Northern Ireland society. Speaking out and taking a leadership role is not the expected norm nor is it encouraged, irrespective of the pivotal role assumed by the women's movement within the establishment of 'The Peace People'[3] and The Northern Ireland Women's Coalition (NIWC).[4] The evolution of the NIWC and the developing voice of women in the political sphere were not welcomed by members of the other political parties (Morgan and McArdle, 2009). This historic default position, that men are better placed to inform peace-building, is one which has developed into a local 'truth'. Galligan (2014: 1) highlights the laboriously slow pace of change politically, with 'women's representation in the Assembly not breaking the 20% mark since powers were devolved to the new power-sharing institutions in 1998'.

The 'invisibility' of young women in Northern Ireland is juxtaposed with the central role occupied by young men throughout the conflict and the subsequent peace machinations. Young men were highlighted

in the media and prioritised in the subsequent targeting of resources (McCready and Loudon, 2015). Young women were not considered or recognised as direct or indirect victims or perpetrators of violence. The legacy of the conflict is viewed as being mostly male and as having little impact on young women. This 'invisibility' in conflict has the net result of 'invisibility' in solution, with resources, engagement strategies and interventions focused more towards young men than young women (Gray and Neill, 2010).

The report, *Still Waiting* (McAlister et al., 2007) extensively records the prominent issues in young women's lives in Northern Ireland. Their findings resonate with similar UK studies (Girlguiding UK, 2013; Jackson and Tinkler, 2007), highlighting a continuing persistence in passive attitudes to the endurance of inequality among young women themselves, particularly those experiencing social and economic disadvantage. *Still Waiting* identified continuing levels of inequality experienced by young women in Northern Ireland – stereotyping in careers, unequal pay, lack of access to opportunities for advancement in the workplace, sex stereotyping in domestic roles and double standards relating to sexual practices. It revealed alarmingly high levels of domestic violence and sexual abuse – (a quarter of the young women respondents). The picture painted of young women's lives was of continuous and growing stress from education, work, family, relationships and the expectation on women to 'do it all'.

Two Steps Forward … One Step Back?

Over the past three decades there have been significant social, economic and cultural changes in the UK and Ireland supported through policy and legislation. Amongst other improvements there are now significantly more women in work, girls are achieving better results than boys at school at all levels, from primary to higher education, and increasingly women are reaching positions of greater power and status than before (Walter, 1998). However, this is not the full picture, either nationally or internationally. The notion that equality has been achieved contrasts to the lived experiences of young women and could arguably point to feminist gains of the past being 'undone' in the present (McRobbie, 2009).

Increasingly, studies show how much of young women's lives are resistant to 'gender equality' (Budgeon, 2001). The most recent economic crisis and government austerity measures have resulted in many facing economic strife; however, recent indicators have shown that young women are amongst the greatest losers across social and economic spheres (Hinds, 2011). Henderson et al. (2007) found that the pull of tradition remains a strong influential force and is experienced more substantially by young women who continue to be more willing to accommodate their careers for family than young men. Despite the wide media coverage that girls are more successful academically, their achievements are not necessarily reflected in the labour market, with young women over-represented in low-paid and casual employment (Thompson et al., 2002; McAlister et al., 2007). Young women continue to have lower self-esteem in early adolescence and are disappointed with their bodies (Orenstein, 2013). There is an alarming increase in easily accessible pornography and young women are now, perhaps more than ever, subjected to unrealistic and increasingly sexualised body images (Walter, 2010). Whilst sexual behaviour and identity is a site of stress for young women (McRobbie, 2009), with contradictory messages of sex as liberation or sex as exploitation, the increasing focus in policy and public discourses on the premature sexualisation of girls is proving to draw attention away from ongoing inequalities and important questions about socially constructed ideas of beauty

(Duschinsky, 2013). The escalating attention to 'celebrity' emerging in popular media and reinforced through television programmes such as 'The X-Factor' suggest that wealth, power and status can be at your fingertips if you 'put yourself out there'. This supports the individualistic perspective of 'if you want it, you can get it' and if you don't 'get it' somehow this is down to your own failings. The message presented to many girls within the dominant popular discourse is that 'you're in control', 'you have choices', often mitigated by their lived experiences and positions, which can create a confusing and isolating climate for girls and young women. This can result in the individuation of personal failure and blame rather than a focus on broader structural influences and inequalities (Duschinsky, 2013; McAlister et al., 2007). The gender territory young women negotiate through adolescence and their transitions to adulthood are laden with these contradictory and confusing messages. It is worth questioning how much agency young women really have in making choices within a neoliberal society that remains predicated on patriarchal norms and fails to engage with structural inequalities that shape these young women's lives.

The global picture presents another perspective where differences in terms of status, power, security and identity continue to emerge (Greer, 2000; Padovic and Reskin, 2002; Walter, 1998; Whelehan, 2007). International treaties and frameworks for gender equality, within a human rights framework, are well established. The UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security, the 1995 Beijing Platform for Action and the UN Commission on the Status of Women present a rolling commentary on the picture for women, nation by nation. More than 1 billion people (mostly women) world-wide live in poverty (WomenWatch, 2015). Violence against women persists both as a weapon of war and a personal tool to wield power. Access to education for girls is a global problem, with long-term impacts on the economic, social and political lives of young women and women internationally. Closer to home, the defiance of reproductive rights across the island of Ireland is an added challenge facing women.

Global social action campaigns 'the girl effect' and 'girl rising' (Bent, 2015) have gained momentum; often coupled with movements driven by large corporations, such as the 'Dove campaign for real beauty' or 'Always, #like a girl campaign'. International development programmes focusing on the empowerment of girls are growing, with project themes of sport, gender-based violence, employment and education most prominent (Hayhurst, 2013; Shain, 2013). Such global programmes' motivations are fundamentally shaped by a neoliberal perspective (Shain, 2013), whereby: 'greater gender equality is also smart economics' (The World Bank, 2012: xiii). Programmes emphasise the economic empowerment of individual girls and young women and further place the weight of substantial social change on the shoulders of girls, whose power is limited. Caution is needed in managing the expectations of *how* the empowerment of girls can realistically achieve the structural development goals tackling poverty and inequality.

Work with Young Women – Surviving against the Odds

Feminist thinking has been disputed in recent decades from a range of different angles. The dominant public discourse is that equality has been achieved, with follow-up inferences that it has gone 'too far', tipping the balance more favourably towards women than men. In the 'post-modern' era, where notions of a 'universal identity' have been challenged, criticism exists of 'old' feminism as failing to recognise the complexity of women's identities, with a growing recognition of a more nuanced intersectional analysis based on race, sexuality, class and location (McCall, 2005; Pilcher and Whelehan, 2004). There

are new and contrasting ideas of 'modern feminism' located within a neoliberal climate (Baumgardner and Richards, 2004) contested as a disarticulation of feminism (McRobbie, 2009). The result has been a constant challenge to feminist ideology and action, hostility to feminism in popular culture (Faludi, 1992) and persistent difficulty in making a convincing argument for the specific need for work with young women.

In Northern Ireland the work has endured against the backdrop of both 'the troubles' and feminism, whereby the emphasis and resources of the youth sector were directed squarely at young men, as a response to managing the local civil disorder (Morgan and McArdle, 2009). The challenge to this was taken up by the Gender Equality Unit of YouthAction Northern Ireland[5] in championing feminist work with young women, from the late 1970s. The organisation, not only developed practice with young women, but also built critical evidence to make the case for young women's work (McAlister et al., 2007; NIAYC, 1978; Trimble, 1990; YouthAction N.I., 2014). This body of work has been pivotal in defining the rationale for and the processes of feminist youth work in the Northern Ireland context. It has, however, not been without its challenges. Whilst many young women's workers have been driven and influenced by feminism, tensions and competing agendas within the youth sector often undermine or minimise the practice (see Morgan and McArdle (2009) and Spence (1996) and for examples); the result being that feminist youth work lacks a strong 'foothold' within the youth sector. Feminist insights which motivated the work initially became suppressed by constant challenge, funding pressures and traditional policy perspectives (Morgan and McArdle, 2009). The hostility experienced towards feminism in practice can result in the 'silencing' of workers and their rationale, principles and understanding of the work. Indeed 'work with young women' that develops without this clarity and engagement with feminist purpose and methodology, can inadvertently *reinforce* and *promote* gender stereotypes and inequality, as opposed to challenging these oppressions – e.g. beauty programmes that fail to explore socially constructed ideas of beauty.

Whilst some important gains have been made for young women, Spence (1996) argues that little impact on structural or organisational change followed. Government policy, even while professing to be gender neutral by using the term 'young people', remains highly gendered (Hanbury et al., 2010). Policy pertaining to anti-social behaviour, drug/alcohol misuse and gun/knife crime is directed towards young men; with protectionist policies directed towards young women, from self-harm to teen pregnancy. Hanbury et al. (2010) argue that work which flows from these policies can *maintain* the gender stereotypes which feminist youth work practices have advocated against. Across UK government departments there is an increasing emphasis on demonstrable outcomes and a desire to fund the defined essentials; with value for money set against predetermined outcomes (Henry et al., 2010). This trend lends itself towards increased managerialism, measurement and 'fix-it' approaches. Practitioners, who set out to do assets-based work focusing on young women in a 'non-problem-centred' way, prompt clashes (or extinction) with policy makers and funding streams consumed with a deficit model of 'fixing' 'problem youth'.

Building a Cacophony of Voices

Morgan and McArdle (2009: 240) have argued that the determination and passion of those central to the practice has been key to its continuity, suggesting that 'stamina and strength, constancy and sustained action and continuous reflection on ideology, vision and practice … continue to be necessary for a future strategy of work with girls and young women'. It is the workers who are the

central protagonists and drivers. Support and development of this collective formed the rationale for a long-standing partnership (from 2003 onwards) between YouthAction Northern Ireland and Ulster University's Community Youth Work department. This began a series of initiatives to combine practice, policy and theory in the field of young women's work. The aim was to amass the groundswell of voices of young women's workers; to build momentum from the collective, to generate gender-conscious theory from their experience and weave these sharper insights back into practice.

This partnership devised a model of gender-conscious practice, proposing an approach to working with young women and young men that proactively challenges societal stereotypes and gendered expectations. The approach recognised that gender-conscious work can be carried out with individuals, groups, or in a large-scale setting, if the principle exists to challenge the social norms of gender that limit the opportunities in explicit and implicit ways. The model was closely followed by 'The Lens Model' (Morgan and Harland, 2009), which accentuated the need for the practitioner to have a keen understanding of how gender impacts on society, on young people, and on their own perspectives and experiences. In using the 'gender lens' to understand the lives of young men and young women, workers can build up an armoury of interventions, programmes and moments to purposefully engage young people in challenging gendered expectations and gender norms.

'The Gender Initiative' seminars ran from 2013 to 2015, open to writers, researchers and practitioners. The purpose of this seminar series was twofold – to develop a support network that would inspire, motivate and develop work with young women; and to sharpen articulation of practice and develop greater confidence in the distinctive qualities permeating practice. These made space for new solidarities to emerge, either relating to local peace and conflict, or transcending the local context, a collective voice on universal themes. The alliance between research and practice as both a research methodology and a strategic action acted to sustain the practice. From violence to technology, from romance to rights, workers explored, described and critiqued their experiences of work with young women. Two focus groups of ten young women's workers self-selected from the broader group, reflecting feminist practice across a range of contexts – the majority being experienced practitioners in the field, alongside early career young women's workers. Quotes used through this text are from focus group participants. The purpose of focus group discussions was to deepen insights on the defining features of empowering work with young women via an exploration described by Reinharz (1992) as a 'demystification framework'. As lack of knowledge can accentuate and perpetuate powerlessness, in *obtaining* the knowledge the potential for change is created (Punch, 2005: 138). Hence, by demystifying these practices and approaches, confidence and competence to engage in powerful feminist practice is encouraged and embraced. Themes were drawn and analysed from the material transcribed from the focus groups and secondary material from seminar participants. These illuminated the key principles, purpose and methods. Using a constant comparative approach (Thomas, 2009), the ideas were tested by the focus groups and the Alchemy of Work with Young Women emerged, as an equation, with a series of associated processes, herein described.

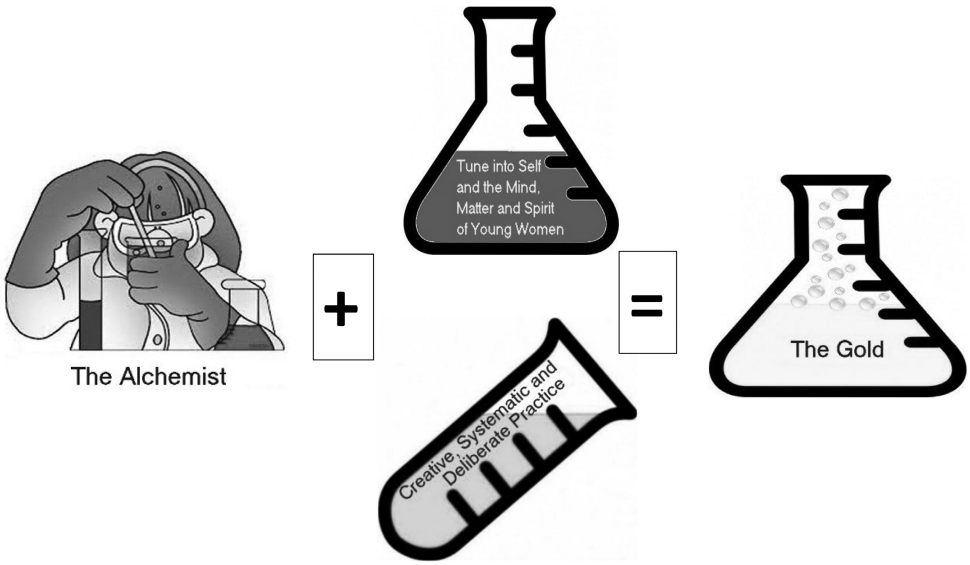
THE ALCHEMY OF WORK WITH YOUNG WOMEN

The key to unlocking the Alchemy of Work with Young Women was in asking a *different*

question. With a starting point of '*what do you like about young women?*' workers immediately focused on what they saw as the *positive* attributes of the young women they encountered in their practice. The exploration then deepened as they uncovered details such as how they used their wisdom and experience to engage young women in a purposeful way; the methods they use; and the potential impact of the work. The research material generated has led to a new language to describe the work: the *alchemy* in practice.

The Alchemy Equation

The simplest definition of Alchemy is the art of transformation. It is a blend of art and science where key elements combine in a perfect ratio, drawing on what already exists. The purpose is changing base metal to gold. It is powerful and magical and at the same time scientific and purposeful. It can be risky and dangerous but can wield valuable results. Alchemy offers a rich metaphor to give form to the practices described. It is best described as the following equation:



The alchemist refers to the practitioner, who uses their gendered lens to tune into self, and the mind, matter and spirit of the young women; then, through creative, systematic and deliberate practice, engages in purposeful ways with the young women to create gold.

The Alchemist is more than simply a conductor of affairs, using their inspired wisdom in intuitive and spontaneous actions. They are an emotional catalyst, a portal between what already exists and new possibilities. They are disciplined and focused towards building assets and strengths. This assets-based approach views young women as having latent potential rather than being the problem to be solved. They channel these positive traits, freeing young women to be creative, engaged and motivated towards action. The Alchemist has charismatic capital and young women are attracted to the persona, flare and the empowering style of a worker that encourages them to flourish. This empowering style taps into an inherent self-belief that in turn promotes a 'can do' attitude amongst young women. The starting point for this process is defined by young women themselves. The Alchemist works to bring ideas through to action, in collaboration with young women, inspiring change for individuals, groups,

communities and society as a whole. In this transformation, lies the gold.

THE ALCHEMY PROCESSES

Using a Gendered Lens to Appreciate Young Women's Lives

Practitioners reported that young women can have ideas and behaviours about being female or male so deeply ingrained that they become ritualised behaviours, practised and repeated, and act as 'proof of identity' as one sex or another. From shopping to 'gossiping', from make-up to weddings, young women are 'initiated' into these rituals from girlhood. The practitioners **disrupted gender rituals** through noticing, naming them and introducing new ways of being; embracing non-traditional activities and challenges. This disruption can leave young women feeling unsettled momentarily; however, challenge to the established order has liberating properties. New rituals offer space for roles and structures to be re-defined.

The practitioners were intentionally **counter-cultural**. They challenged sexism, cultural norms and patriarchy in planned ways as an expected part of their practice in an attempt to reduce the negative restrictive hold of historical, biographical and cultural experiences. They actively worked against negative gendered messages whilst embracing the positive material the young women brought and presented. Antrobus (2000: 52) concurs that 'the counter-cultural perspective reminds us that asserting women's values and the existence of an alternative, "female" culture is an essential part of the process for transformation'. Inherent in this counter-cultural perspective is an understanding that issues faced by young women are the result of deep-seated historical gender inequalities. The emphasis is on change, not blame – for example, using this approach with young mothers leads to less emphasis on parenting techniques and more work on building independence; less emphasis on sexual health and more emphasis on health inequalities; less emphasis on 'getting out to work' and more emphasis on lobbying for affordable childcare options. Using their wisdom to identify **real-life situations** led workers towards meaningful engagement centred in the worlds of the young women themselves:

> It's all about using the stuff that is there.
>
> It's actually something that so many of the group had been affected by, like let's actually hone in on this and let's actually find out more and like feed it into the programme … (Focus group participant, FGP)[6]

Practitioners in the focus groups spoke of the tales young women brought from local, national or global media that were current and salient. Recognising these 'real-life' current interests provided a powerful source of material to get young women thinking critically about the world around them (Bowler, 2010).

Awakening the Girl Child

Many cultural and social norms have the effect of dampening down the natural exuberance, curiosity or fun that younger girls may freely express. McAlister et al. (2007) identify the 'leisure squeeze' as a feature of young women's busy lives – intrinsically linked to the effects of gender stereotypes on their personal circumstances: the expectation for young women to bear the brunt of household and family chores; the growing caring responsibilities for other siblings or extended family members; and the pressure to do well academically. Girls and young women take on such burdens of responsibility at increasingly young ages. Leisure pursuits are squeezed and the fun and freedom of expression minimised. Young women often become more self-conscious, more anxious and less relaxed. Indeed Batsleer (2013: 26) poses a

question to practitioners, asking why girls are so discouraged from 'risk'. She suggests that risk should be re-associated 'with excitement, rebellion, wildness, pleasure and potential'. One practitioner similarly described the need to find ways to enable young women to re-encounter a sense of fun and play:

> Whenever you do see them overcoming their inhibitions and acting the whack, you kind of stand back, when you are doing a gaggy ice-breaker and they are being an eejit, and they don't mind ... you don't get much opportunity to do that ... you become grown up too early. (FGP)

When young women are positively engaged there is an excitement, an enthusiasm, about making an idea happen that can be recognised, harnessed and nurtured:

> I just think that the way whenever they put their heads to something ... how enthusiastic they are and just want to get it done.
>
> … the fact that they are so bright and observant and like notice things around them and then be that enthusiastic to share them thoughts with those around them. (FGP)

This **enthusiasm** is in contrast to a cultural norm of self-consciousness and self-doubt, a pervasive undercurrent which if left can diminish their participation:

> They [the young women] sort of negative self-talk, but then they start to do it [the activity] and they start to change their mind even within a session ... I always recall Amber [pseudonym] within a session on interior design and it was 'I can't do this ... this is going to be crap ... I'm not creative'. (FGP)

The practitioner worked through this self-doubt …

> … and she done her table and her table was fantastic and she was 'I can't wait to get this home'. (FGP)

The enthusiasm described by the workers is not necessarily a physical bounding enthusiasm, but nonetheless had a propensity towards action. The practitioners find the fun and give permission for young women to join in. Through the visceral experience of the physical feeling of enjoyment they engage with each other in light-hearted and laughter-filled interactions. This in turn builds their enthusiasm and desire to be involved.

Encouraging Camaraderie and Collective Wisdom

Practitioners reported the tendency for young women to tell stories of their lives and communities. Through listening to stories they found ways of hearing how **young women made sense of their worlds**. This active listening is the foundation of the relationship and an empowering process whereby young women are liberated to speak about their true lives and experiences:

> I really love that when people are just, kind of just coming to tell stories and stuff but they are just really real about it. I think I really tune into that … wanting to be more aware of how you feel and own your feelings and things like that. (FGP)

Making sense of these stories is a fully collaborative approach which works by giving value to the sharing, as more than simply idle chat, thus leading to even more dialogue:

> maybe in two weeks down the line, you are talking about an issue and you are able to say 'do you remember you said to me … such and such and such' and that fits into this and how do the rest of you think that this fits into this' – they start to realise that you are listening to the whole experience and they start to respond then by feeling that it is okay to share more and more because you're interested. (FGP)

The more the practitioner tunes in, the more the young women and worker collaborate to make sense of the wider world.

How young women are, **as a collective**, is a dominant feature of the work and counter to a general stereotype of 'bitchiness' that is often the anticipated persona for young women. One worker made a distinction

between what is inherent in young women and what has been learned:

> the friendship and loyalty with young women in some of the groups I think is a really endearing quality that they have. But I know that can go either way ... there are qualities that they kind of learn, like that bitchiness … you are kind of made to be bitchy. (FGP)

She went on to refer to how group members show sustained and critical support towards each other:

> I've seen young mums being really supportive of each other even with things like you know weaning children or getting them to go to bed ... they are so kind and understanding of where everybody is coming from I suppose. (FGP)

The positive collective not only related to practical advice-giving but moved into positive reinforcement:

> when they have achieved something, they are all chuffed with themselves … and they are so proud and so supportive of each other 'Jesus, you were brilliant, well done, that was really good'. (FGP)

The **friendship, loyalty and camaraderie** are strong and valued within the psyche of the young women's group, and practitioners tune into and embrace these strong positive attributes.

Organic Conversation

Using conversation is a tried and tested informal education methodology (Jeffs and Smith, 2005). Young women can quickly move into deep conversations, for example, regarding relationships, sex or deeply-felt emotions. Some workers may fear or shy away from real or deep disclosure and tend to keep conversations light and frivolous. However, deep conversations on equality, stereotypes, on sexual and social relationships, on rights and social justice were all part of the repertoire of *these* focus group members. Embedded in these conversations were **a blend of humour and gravitas** and workers did not fear where conversations might lead. They identified a process whereby young women started to have organic conversations on issues of equality and oppression; they moved through to a deeper exploration, to a point where they made connections from broader concepts to their own lives and vice versa. The practitioners' readiness to embrace these conversations was imperative. Practitioners referred to the tone of the discussions as a two-way respectful conversation, avoiding moralising and judgement. The workers 'joined in' the conversation in the tone already set by the individual or group.

This connects to the role of conversation as an enlightening process, which Blyth describes as 'the spontaneous business of making connections' (2008: 4). The use of stories from social media (Snapchat, Facebook, YouTube) was a powerful tool capturing the imagination of the group whereby they established relevance to their lives, raising consciousness and connecting to wider cultural, social and political agendas. Beginning with conversation based on real-life scenarios brought naturally occurring opportunities for awareness-raising. The practitioners through their inspired wisdom, brought emphasis and gravitas to the meaning behind the story, resulting in both visibility and voice to those things the young women deemed important.

Getting Caught in the Moment

Working with young women is both visceral and cerebral. Culturally, logic is much more valued within society, with discussions, writing and presentations valued as communication and learning tools. The impact of body or sense-filled activities can be underestimated; however, the practitioners reported how young women flourished through these experiences. The new activities, at first, can seem peculiar to young women, as they were not in the habit of taking part in a piece

of dance, for example, or playing drums. The body has lost its physical memory of what it feels like to do these things. The worker revives wonder and awe in how the senses can enrich day-to-day living, through ice-breakers involving physical touch or listening to songs in a different way. It is not that these instincts have been lost but they are untapped. There can be therapeutic aspects to this type of sensory work, but coupled with other light-hearted approaches, these are liberating and building rather than fixing and repairing actions. Additionally, for young women who have not found joy and achievement in sport, for example, they often have little experience or **opportunity for immersive activities** – those activities which have a physical component are deeply involving and have the effect of shutting out the world. In these 'flow' activities (Csikszentmihalyi, cited in McArdle and Ward, 2015) losing track of time is a noticeable feature; through them we can be lifted from a self-conscious space into an unconscious or a sub-conscious space. The focus is no longer on 'how do I look?' but rather on 'how am I doing and what is coming next?' This liberating experience for young women provides a chance to develop skills, work towards accomplishments, and take a break from persistent negative self-talk. Practitioners introduced immersive activities to the groups through their own enthusiasm; communicating and demonstrating belief in young women.

Building Fire in the Belly

The practitioners described the strength of spirit that young women bring, combined with strong emotions and an inner conviction towards justice. They connected this to a level of resilience within young women and their ability to endure extreme pressure. It can lie dormant if under-nourished, however it is powerful when embraced:

> See, some of the young women I work with … they just completely blow me away with what they have been through. And how they still get up out of bed in the morning … And I just think if I had been through the care system or been from a broken family or had to care for siblings and then maybe have their own kids now or maybe having trouble from her partner … You just think Superwoman, like seriously … into yourself thinking … how are you still coping, the strength and determination ... (FGP)

The discovery of injustice and inequality can often engage individuals on a cerebral level. But to make the connections between 'self' and the injustice of the world around us is more of a visceral reaction where you feel movement in your belly:

> I love when you get to the point where you've really made your group angry. I think like you say something and until you take it apart a wee bit you don't see the inequalities that are there … like you don't see that until you think about it. And they don't see that until you are processing it with them as well. (FGP)

This **strength of conviction combined with strong emotions** proved to be a driving force for 'building fire in the belly'. Starting with everyday things and a 'gut feeling' that something is not quite right (a music video, a sexist or homophobic comment), the practitioner compels the young women to explore their emotions. When the gut feeling builds, young women question more closely, building momentum and propelling them towards challenge and action. The process ignites the spark, which builds the fire through making connections that seem so obvious, yet may well have been dismissed as 'just how it is'. One worker described the steady and slow process of walking through issues about gender:

> and all of a sudden, things that they were not interested in, you have got so many stories around the table about that one thing, and I suppose that is good to hone into. (FGP)

Another practitioner identified their own approach of acutely tuning into the movements of the young women and tuning into

the ideas and principles which boost their propensity towards action, big or small:

> it is that kind of ownership from the very start that once you throw it out there, and give them the material, that kind of inspires. From that point then on, the rest of the process is theirs in regards to what goes on or what they do with it. (FGP)

The combination of the intense physical feeling, with a new language and logic of how to explain injustice, offers young women the tools for engagement. The practitioner acts as a portal between the young woman's current world and the wider world – encouraging them to break free of the constraints of their current societal context and from those aspects of life that are 'preventing'. Through the use of creativity they can unlock latent ambitions and abilities. The young women learn reflective and noticing skills and consciously note developments in their thinking and action skills. This then helps to build their critical engagement with the wider world.

Repeat and Return

The depth and breadth of the prevailing social norms can be hard to shift. Sometimes young women need to be convinced. To overcome the deeply-seated psychology and unconscious processes of how young women are conditioned to think, feel and act (Walkerdine et al., 2001), practitioners needed a sophisticated understanding of the cycle of self-doubt (e.g. when faced with a new opportunity young women begin enthusiastically; this enthusiasm can wane immeasurably with seeping self-doubt and embarrassment; resulting in indecision and withdrawal). Current gender dis-aggregated statistics show that young women are achieving more highly than young men at GCSEs and A' levels[7] (Burns et al., 2015). This pattern is not surprising when we consider the persistent passivity of young women and their learnt ability to follow rules and regulations (Orenstein, 2013). School systems and achievements reward the ability to consume information in an unquestioning way. The practitioners discussed how a tacit unquestioning acceptance, alongside embarrassment of being wrong, discouraged young women from challenging the world and the knowledge of others. Acknowledging the pervasiveness of this pattern seemed crucial to practitioners in understanding how young women can disengage before even starting something new. The practitioners talked of the need for **persistence in delivering the same messages** consistently in different ways to counteract the centuries-old entrenched cultural messages. The strategy was therefore to make personal contact close to the beginning of the new adventure in order to nudge the young woman forward. A few repeated nudges might be needed, requiring a gentle persistence and the delivery of the same messages returned to again and again, to strengthen these new alternative messages. Helping young women to be more critical in their way of thinking about the world was inherent in the practice.

The Cogs in a Wheel

Inspiring towards personal and collective action is the purpose of transformative work with young women recognising that individual transformation is a small cog, with collective action a larger cog and structural change as the large wheel to be turned. An example of practice provided by one of the practitioners is an illustration of this. A small group of young women along with their worker started off decorating shoes for International Women's Day, under the theme of 'Move 4 Equality'. They teamed up with young women from four other projects and took the lead position in a rally to Belfast City Hall. One young woman made a speech to the crowd while others were DJ-ing on a bus. Inspired by taking part in the rally, a number of the group took part in a workshop

two weeks later on the history of the suffragettes. The principle of 'one thing leads to another' is important within this example. Working to make the connections between the small things that you act upon and the big things you make happen are an important component of empowering practice. For most of the young women the idea of attending a workshop on women's right to vote and the history of the suffragettes was inconceivable at the start of the process, but, incrementally, in learning the language and ideas of equality, it developed more salience for them.

Starting at the right place is the art and moving to the next steps at the right time is the science of work with young women. The analogy for this work is of tributaries running into rivers. The practitioner holds the belief that many small actions can lead to collective action and broader impact as a result. Whilst the worker is a force for inspiration, paradoxically, they must also be realistic. For example, one worker spoke of a young woman, in the week following the International Women's Day Rally, despondently asking '*I wonder when we will see any change?*' The art here is to inspire towards action and retain realism without damaging the optimism and ideals of the young women. The worker's role is to consistently build the resilience and sustainability of the young women. Through reflection (Batsleer, 2013: 54), they can then identify what change is immediately possible and the role of collective action in building towards actual social change.

Building a Public Persona and Voice

The public sphere has historically been an unwelcoming territory for women (Imray and Middleton, 2002). Public exposure feels so threatening that it can lead to young women living and inhabiting the private world rather than having a public persona or face. This can perpetuate the 'invisibility' of young women in everyday life (Batsleer, 2013), in politics and in the many public spheres. Central to the Alchemy of Work with Young Women is **raising visibility**, through working with the personal and the political. In personal terms, building a public persona includes developing ways for young women to communicate and express themselves in the social and public world. Through practising bravery, building fearlessness, deciding upon important messages, developing voices and constant reflection on distance travelled, young women conceive and build a public persona. The practitioner then works collaboratively to find opportunities for **young women to promote this public persona** and engage in meaningful ways in their communities, wider society and the world around them.

CONCLUSION

The Alchemy of Work with Young Women has been created and shaped within a Northern Ireland context. It developed against the backdrop of a society emerging from conflict which resulted in both a low visibility of the work, yet a slow, steady progression and a strong imperative to maintain and sustain practice. The central protagonists of strong empowering practice with young women have essentially been the workers themselves. The need to support and develop these practitioners is central to embedding strong practices, now and for the future. The process, of building momentum from a collective, generating gender-conscious theory from their experiences and weaving these insights back into practice, has strengthened both motivation and focus for the work locally. Strong work with young women has feminist values at its centre as a driving and guiding force. Where feminist values separate from method, work with young women can lose its way. In a context of oppression and continued gender inequality, the Alchemy of

Work with Young Women offers an antidote which is empowering and transformative.

Work with young women in Northern Ireland echoes a range of approaches in both Ireland and the UK, however, the universal themes of empowerment and transformation resonate within a broader global setting. Further insights and wisdom could be generated from using the alchemy equation and processes across a range of social and cultural contexts, or across disciplines. The practices articulated in this chapter are proposed, not as a panacea to world poverty or humanitarian crises, but with a view to the empowerment of girls and young women as a cog in the wheel.

Notes

1 Douglas Hurd, Making the world a safer place: our five priorities, *Daily Telegraph*, 1 January 1992.
2 The Good Friday Agreement, between the UK and Republic of Ireland governments was agreed on Good Friday, 1998 and entered legislation as the Northern Ireland Act, 1998. This heralded the beginning of a peace process for the region, with paramilitary ceasefires and new democratic structures.
3 The Peace People is an organisation based in Northern Ireland that promotes non-violence, peace and justice around the world.
4 The Northern Ireland Women's Coalition (NIWC) was a small political party led by women, which operated from 1996 to 2006.
5 YouthAction Northern Ireland is a 75-year-old regional voluntary youth work organisation, formerly known as the Northern Ireland Association of Youth Clubs (NIAYC).
6 FGP will be used throughout to refer to Focus Group Participant.
7 A' levels are exams for leaving post-primary education.

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